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SUBJECT: AFRICA ON FRONT BURNER AS POPE ADDRESSES DIP CORPS

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Summary

11. (SBU) Pope Benedict placed particular emphasis on challenges facing Africa in his second annual address to the diplomatic corps. He called attention to Darfur and Somalia, and criticized an attempt "to trivialize abortion" in Africa. Benedict decried the uselessness of "armed solutions" to international crises, pointing to last summer's Lebanon crisis as an example. He implied that Syria should be involved in talks on Lebanon, even as he emphasized the need for Lebanese sovereignty. Benedict urged a resumption of the trade negotiations of the Doha Development Round and support for the process of debt cancellation and reduction for the poorest countries. From the USG perspective, concerns the pope expressed on Iran, Cuba, and North Korea were welcome inclusions. His commitment to religious freedom similarly touched on a key US interest. End Summary.

Pope Addresses Dip Corps

12. (U) Addressing the representatives of 175 nations in his second "state of the world" address (complete text emailed to EUR/WE), Pope Benedict placed particular emphasis on challenges facing Africa. The pontiff decried the international community's failure - "powerless for almost four years" - to protect the population and achieve a political solution in Darfur. The recent "internationalization" of the situation in Somalia had the pope repeating a call for negotiation, a general theme he repeated several times in his remarks. He called for the application of the rule of law to ensure the disarmament of

warlords, while lauding the move to democracy in the Great Lakes Region states of Burundi and the DRC. Benedict also warned of an attempt "to trivialize abortion surreptitiously" through the Maputo Protocol and related Plan of Action adopted by the African Union's Health Ministers [ref a and septel].

Middle East - Lebanon

¶3. (SBU) On the Middle East, "a source of great anxiety" to the Vatican, the pope noted the "positive signs" in recent weeks between the Israelis and Palestinians. Benedict said the Holy See would "never tire of reiterating that armed solutions achieve nothing, as we saw in Lebanon last summer." He emphasized that Lebanon depended upon "the unity of all its components, and upon fraternal relations between its different religious and social groupings." He implied that Syria should be involved in the search for an answer to Lebanon crisis (calling for a "global approach...which excludes no one from the search for a negotiated settlement" to the issue), even as he emphasized the right of the Lebanese to "see the integrity and sovereignty of their country respected."

Legitimate Concerns on Iran

¶4. (U) The pope mentioned the need for Iran to "give a satisfactory response to the "legitimate concerns of the international community" regarding its nuclear program. He said

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that steps such as this could help stabilize the entire region, especially Iraq, still "disfigured" with appalling violence.

¶5. (SBU) Curiously, Pope Benedict used different terms for Israeli and Palestinian nationhood. Israelis, said the pope, have a right to live in peace in their "state", while Palestinians have the right to a "free and sovereign homeland." All four versions (the French original and the Italian, English and Spanish translations) of the pope's address used different terms. Our contacts tell us that the Holy See remains committed to the two-state solution, and downplayed the alternate choice of words in this instance.

Responsibilities of Wealthy Nations

¶6. (U) Benedict emphasized the continuing problem of world hunger and urged the leaders of the wealthiest nations to ensure that poor countries were "able to benefit from the fruits of goods that are rightfully theirs." In this context, the pope urged a resumption of the trade negotiations of the Doha Development Round and a continuation and acceleration of the

process of debt cancellation and reduction for the poorest countries. Later in the speech he reminded the diplomats of "the commitment of developed countries to devote 0.7% of their GNP to international aid. He also pointed out the need to combat corruption and promote good governance in the developing world.

¶7. (SBU) As he turned to Latin America, the pope described his attention to the "long internal conflict" in Colombia. He tacitly urged recently elected left-leaning leaders to combine a respect for "all the components of society" (such as the Church) with laudable efforts to improve "certain economic indicators." In reference to Cuba, Benedict played the standard Vatican card first played by the late John Paul II: "Let Cuba open itself to the world, and let the world open itself to Cuba."

Asia: North Korea Nukes, China

¶8. (SBU) Turning to North Korea, Benedict reiterated the Vatican's position a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula, though he cautioned that this goal "must be pursued within the context of negotiations." Benedict said that the international community should not hold humanitarian aid hostage to the results of such talks. The pope pointed to China and India as economic powerhouses with growing impact on the international scene and mentioned Vietnam in the context of its WTO entry. Concluding that section of the speech with a reference to religious freedom, the pope was again emphasizing the need for economic advancement and human rights to go hand in hand.

Europe

¶9. (U) Benedict did not neglect Europe, discussing EU expansion and the need for protection of religious freedom and the institutional rights of the Church. He called for a resolution of the energy disputes among Russia, Belarus and Ukraine, and prayed for stability in the Balkans.

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Comment

¶10. (SBU) In his second address to the diplomatic corps, Pope Benedict was relatively concrete when addressing challenges facing the world. We understand this reflects greater input from the Secretariat of State (Foreign Ministry), now that the pope's choices for Secretary of State (PM equivalent) and Secretary for Relations with States (FM equivalent) are in

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place.

¶11. (SBU) Papal language for diplomatic occasions such as these will seldom be pointed, but the speech provided ammunition for proponents of many causes to claim backing from the Vatican. From the USG perspective, the pope's concerns about the nuclear programs of Iran and North Korea were welcome inclusions, even if the Holy See tends to favor dialogue over sanctions. The pope's praise of efforts to combat drug trafficking and corruption, and his commitment to religious freedom similarly touched on key U.S. interests and could be cited as the USG works on these issues.
SANDROLINI